

Onions in Everything: choreographic representations of the American food system

RESEARCH QUESTION

“Can the relationship between small- and large-scale systems of society be represented choreographically?”

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

My research project, *Onions in Everything: choreographic representations of the American food system*, culminated in a dance performance that premiered in December 2018. It demonstrates how a finite aspect of the food system, a single food pantry in Columbus, Ohio – the Near Northside Emergency Materials Assistance Program (NNEMAP) – is related to the greater system that contains it. The choreographic work highlights the stories and efforts of the clients, volunteers, and staff of the NNEMAP food pantry while exposing dysfunction within the larger American food system. One of my priorities was to build a piece collaboratively, working with the six dancers who would perform *Onions in Everything*.

When first prompted to consider the possibilities for my senior thesis as a second-year student, I emphasized my interest in “creating work that provokes audiences by reflecting and analyzing tensions and inequalities that exist within and between human populations.” I believed that completing this task was as simple as selecting a social issue that ails our nation, diving into sociological research, generating material based on that research, and building a choreographic structure that reflects the gathered concepts and theories. While this method might successfully demonstrate and analyze a social issue, it does not necessarily reach people outside of the normative dance audience (dancers, their families, and their friends). With this project, I hoped to challenge the traditional dance performance model by changing the source of my research and

inviting participation from an outside organization. This would encourage individuals who were not explicit members of the process to participate in the activation of change.

Social Service Investigation

As a student in the Semester of Service program through the Office of Student Life, I became familiar with several nonprofit organizations around Columbus with missions that tackled poignant inequities in the community. At the start of 2018, I began volunteering with NNEMAP, a local food pantry whose mission is to “help (their) neighbors enhance their lives, health and self-sufficiency through access to nutritious food and other resources” (NNEMAP Food Pantry). At this point, I identified that food inequity was the pertinent social issue I would explore for this project, with my experience at NNEMAP being the base of my research.

In spring semester 2018, I volunteered twice a week for five to seven hours to familiarize myself with the pantry and clientele. Over the summer, I worked at the pantry every day for three weeks, and in autumn semester 2018, I volunteered for three hours each week. In total, I volunteered for approximately 180 hours during my research process. My work at NNEMAP ranged from the backroom to the front desk: filling shelves with canned goods, sorting through miscellaneous donation packages, welcoming people into the facility, helping clients shop based on their family size, and breaking down a never-ending stream of boxes to be recycled. This experience helped me gain a broader understanding of the culture and community of people whose lives are compromised by inaccessibility to nutritious food, as well as the people who choose to assist an organization that serves those communities. Through conversations with clients and their families, other volunteers, and the pantry staff, I gained a wealth of information about the daily activities in the pantry, the history of the organization, and the paralleled obstacles and frustrations that the staff and clients face. My observations can be narrowed into

three categories which I have titled sociological imagination, social diffusion, and systemic harmony vs. cacophony.

Sociological Imagination

“Use your sociological imagination” is an improved way of saying “look at the big picture.” According to Scott Sernau’s *Social Inequality in a Global Age*, “...C. Wright Mills (1959) referred to our ability to connect our personal biographies to the broader sweep of history and society and to see the connections between personal troubles and social conditions as the sociological imagination” (Sernau 8). It is a practice that puts immediate issues into perspective by providing context for singular struggles rather than minimizing them. Sociological imagination lifts the veil of perceived isolation, allowing people to see that others around them encounter similar adversities. When working at NNEMAP, I became interested in how the varying levels of sociological imagination influenced client/volunteer/staff relationships with food and with one another. Through my observations, I learned that clients and volunteers frequently had limited sociological imaginations, but on opposing ends of the spectrum. For example, a client might become frustrated with the limited selection of meat and place blame on the pantry staff rather than the inequitable food system. A volunteer might hold judgment about a client who is resistant to a family-size limitation without understanding that, often, in communities of poverty, kinship extends beyond governmental definitions. On the other hand, staff members’ sociological imagination heightens their awareness of the flawed social structures. This results in the best possible management of the organization, but often leaves them feeling defeated—fighting against a system that will never provide answers for why basic needs are not automatically granted to all people. These are the sorts of nuanced issues that made the work challenging to develop.

Social Diffusion

Social diffusion, or cultural diffusion, is a theory developed first by Everett Rogers in respect to innovation and technology, but can be applied to the distribution of ideas and beliefs from one social group to another by way of dependable individual interaction. In *No One Eats Alone: Food as a Social Enterprise*, Michael Carolan discusses social diffusion. He states, “...people tend to follow the lead of those they trust when deciding whether to do anything with new knowledge” (Carolan 114). Trust is the keyword in this sentence: we only change our ideas about the world when someone we trust encourages us to do so. I frequently witnessed social diffusion while volunteering at NNEMAP. When the volunteers, many of whom come from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, develop meaningful relationships with clients, who generally have lower socio-economic status, what happens is social diffusion across class boundaries—an occurrence that is embarrassingly rare in America, and is, in part, to blame for the state of economic stratification in this country. In NNEMAP, social diffusion creates a sense of community—genuine altruism, friendship, appreciation, and gratitude exist not only within groups, but also between them. Clients and volunteers share and hear meaningful stories that ultimately expand their sociological imaginations and initiate a desire for social change.

Systemic Harmony vs. Cacophony

This concept most directly addressed my research question about the relationship between large- and small-scale systems (in this scenario, the relationship between the American food system and NNEMAP food pantry). It became apparent that the most potent relationship between these two systems lies in their function and intent. While the larger system is quite apparently dysfunctional (this country faces extreme food inequality), the individual systems of charity that combat this inequality, in which volunteers play a significant role, are necessary and

generally efficient. The assistant director of the organization and I often discussed the frustratingly illogical nature of the food system, nonprofit funding and management, and the utter oblivion to and disregard of systemic inadequacy. Material-assistance social service, and social service in general, is often a superficial fix for much deeper issues. However, my intention is not to discount social service, such as NNEMAP. Without these systems in place, the state of low- and working-class populations would be far worse—complete systemic cacophony, if you will. My point is—we can do better. Curing food inequality, much like curing diseases, requires treating the cause and the symptoms. Hunger and food insecurity will be greatly reduced if volunteering for food-based civic associations (small-scale) and motivating politics for a more equitable system (large-scale) work together in systemic harmony.

What I learned from my time at NNEMAP is enough to fill twice the number of pages I am allotted for this research paper. Having identified the complexity inherent in this sociological research, I was compelled to develop a more simplified structure to share with the cast.

Choreographic Process

To generate material, I attempted several different methods. Rather than lecturing on the theories I delineated above, I organized my understanding of the food system into four categories: scarcity, abundance, effort, and ease. Simply stated: food is unequally distributed in this country—often with an abundance on the economic top and a scarcity at the economic bottom (defined not only by quantity, but by variety and quality as well). Often, ease is associated with that abundance, and effort is associated with that scarcity. In a few rehearsals, I facilitated discussions about the relationships between these ideas. We thought of times in which we experienced scarcity, abundance, effort, and ease and the emotions we associated with those times. With scarcity, feelings of panic, anxiety, exhaustion, and disappointment arose. Effort in

relation to scarcity invoked experiences of impatience, insecurity, and confusion. In considering abundance, feelings of warmth, comfort, and relaxation surfaced. We associated entitlement, relief, privilege, and ignorance with ease. I then asked each dancer to develop a segment of phrasework that expressed each idea. From this material, I constructed a dance in five parts: Prologue; Establishment of Place; Sociological Imagination/Systemic Cacophony; Systemic Harmony; and Social Diffusion.

Prologue

Onions in Everything opened with my recitation of an extended metaphor I wrote about the relationship between food and the human experience. It highlights the similarities between humanity and the food we consume, suggesting that through the lens of nourishment, we can understand more about ourselves and the societies we participate in. It is a play on the phrase “we are what we eat,” insinuating that this can be applicable beyond our physical selves—the way *food* is categorized, labeled, valued, distributed, and grown is similar to the way humans are. The text for the piece is below:

They say we are what we eat

*We are roasted root vegetables – rutabaga,
sweet potato, beets, turnips – and sometimes
radishes
We are onions in everything
We are family dinner on our favorite holiday
We are the crunch of our favorite chips*

*We are sweet, savory, bitter, sour, salty,
bland*

*We are healthy, but not always
Sometimes we are too much, or not enough*

*We are diverse, we come in a variety of
shapes, sizes, and colors
We are messy like tacos; complicated like
artichokes*

*We are in and out of season
perishable, we do have an expiration date*

*We are flawed; sometimes rejected because
our skin isn't bright and shiny
Or we're too old
Or too dark, or too light
Or too soft, or too firm*

We fit into some dishes, others we do not

*We are assigned to class and culture
We are not evenly distributed*

*We can grow on our own, but we thrive in
the presence of others*

*We are filling
We are nourishing
We are part and whole*

*We are what we love
We are what we need
We are what we eat*

Establishment of Place

The section following my speaking was a more direct homage to NNEMAP, including a gesture sequence developed from actual observed gestures from volunteers, clients, and staff members. The sound in this section is a mix of recordings from the pantry, including the sounds of carts on uneven pavement, conversation in the main room, whistling in the backroom, cardboard tearing, and cans stacking. Following the gesture sequence, the dancers unite with a percussive section that progresses from one end of the space to the other. The rhythms mimic the rhythmic nature of backroom work in the pantry, as well as the collective effort of NNEMAP staff and volunteers.

Sociological Imagination/Systemic Cacophony

The dancers transition into a diagonal line facing one dancer who is isolated in the corner. Out of the silence, *Working Poor* by Fantastic Negrito plays while five of the six dancers perform their individual “effort” phrases one by one in a single-file line. The isolated dancer performs her “ease” phrase. This juxtaposition between effort and ease is a demonstration of the present class structure in America. The wealthy have ease, with which comes a sense of oblivion—demonstrated by the averted focus of the isolated dancer. She often doesn’t see or understand the struggles of people of lower economic status, which the other five dancers represent. In contrast, the five dancers performing effort push at the boundary between rich and poor, getting as close to the isolated dancer as possible, but never breaking it. Eventually, the music fades and recordings of people who ride the poverty line fill the space. The isolated dancer responds to this by backing up into the group, suddenly seeing their struggles for the first time. This break in ignorance represents the expansion of the sociological imagination. The chaotic nature of this section represents the systemic cacophony.

Systemic Harmony

I constructed the next section with movement collected from the abundance material. To represent the feelings of abundance, I chose *Sumarmorgunn à Heimaey*, an Icelandic hymn about the island, Heimaey, which directly translates to “Home Island.” It was apropos because when discussing abundance, the dancers talked most about home, family, and holidays. I also feel that choral harmony has an emotional depth that is indicative of abundance – it sounds plentiful. In this section, the dancers move in unison, the harmony of the movement complimenting the harmony of the music.

Social Diffusion

In this final section, I created a world of care and empathy using the scarcity material. Each dancer has a solo moment to share their story of scarcity through movement while the rest of the group watches and provides support. This demonstrates the connections between clients, volunteers, and staff members, and how those connections result in a stronger sense of community.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

There is no doubt that the most challenging aspect of this project was to translate my sociological research into a choreographic process and piece that could make these ideas and connections legible to the audience. Although I am grateful to have started the research and logistical process as early as January of my third year, I wish I had also explored the possibility of working creatively sooner. One semester to create a work as nuanced as I intended this one to be was not enough time. I found myself overwhelmed and frustrated for most of the choreographic process and I believe this came through in the work. With just a few more rehearsals, my dancers and I would have been more satisfied and comfortable with the final

product.

With this project, I wanted reach beyond the usual dance audience in a productive and meaningful way. Although I researched an outside organization, I did not do enough to involve members of the organization in the project. At the start of my process, I had an interest in community engagement and art-making, but I knew little about to facilitate the kind of work that would inspire communities from within, rather than imposing my own ideas about dance and movement. About halfway through, I realized I could have done a more communally immersive project with this organization, but it was too late to change the path I had delineated for myself. Now, I feel that I have the tools and experience to lead a different kind of project than this one became, and I hope to do so in the future.

In retrospect, merely inviting NNEMAP to participate in this project was not enough to diversify the audience in the way I would have liked. Taking the performance offsite (perhaps setting it in the pantry) and pushing a more rigorous promotional campaign would have been more successful in actively welcoming people from outside of the dance department.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

With this project, I answered my research question to the best of my ability, dedicated time to an organization that depends on the consistency and persistence of volunteers, and designed a piece of dance that captured the challenge of social service, specifically in the food system.

I am proud of the tangible result of this project—in place of an admission fee, we asked audience members to bring personal hygiene items to donate to NNEMAP. Because of access to the food bank and grocery donations, individual food donations are often frustrating for staff and volunteers, being far more work than they are worth. It is significantly more helpful to donate

products that SNAP (the food stamp program) and the food bank cannot supply, like personal hygiene products. At the performance of this work, we collected 300 items, ranging from toothpaste to laundry detergent, from an audience of about 90 people.

Sean Becker, the assistant director of NNEMAP, who attended the performance, wrote to me afterwards about his experience of the work: “Triumphant and tragic work all rolled into one. Kind of sums up every day in the social service business for client and service provider alike – so mission accomplished!” (Becker).

IMPLICATION OF FUTURE GOALS

Often, the most fruitful aspect of working on any project is meeting new people and organizations. Early last semester, my advisor introduced me to Ann Carlson, a renowned artist and choreographer. The introduction was inspired by the connection between our projects—food, or nourishment, as Ann fondly refers to the human relationship with food. Ann has been invited by the Wexner Center for the Arts, as an Artist Residency Award recipient. She is creating *Symphonic Body / Food*, a community-based dance project funded by InFACT, Ohio State University’s Initiative for Food and Agricultural Transformation. The performance, which includes participants from all corners of the food system in Columbus, Ohio, is an orchestra of improvised and set gestures conducted by the choreographer. I am serving as a choreographic assistant on the project, meeting with participants, building gestural portraits, helping lead rehearsals, and coordinating the logistics of the performance.

Through this project and the Community Art-Making course I took with Dr. Nyama McCarthy-Brown last semester, I have developed a deeper interest in and understanding of community-based dance projects and immersive community engagement. As I plan my next steps, I prioritize creating and participating in a system that makes visible the strength and

contribution of all individuals and communities, and I hope to do so through community-based art projects and organizations. I believe that my experience at this University has given me the tools to make dance a valuable part of this system.

Works Cited

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